

Budget Subcommittee Minutes: Fire Department

Date: Wednesday, October 17, 2012

Attendees: Chief Brian Comeau, Asst. Chiefs Ken Berkenbush and Eric Wilking, fire department; Harry Thayer, Corey Stevens and Rob Corson, budget recommendations sub- committee, and Selectman Don Clement.

Meeting Begins: 3:10 pm

Overview: Ken Berkenbush explains that there are really no surprises in the budget this year. Healthcare and Retirement increases are a concern so many of the department initiatives have been delayed.

Health Department:

He goes on to explain that last year they pushed for the Health Officer to be fulltime (she was at 32hrs). This is no longer an item this year. The Health Officer will remain at 32.5 hours due to budget concerns listed above. She is an asset and pushing her up to full time will be a goal for NEXT year. This year has been very busy with the Hep C crisis.

Ken Berkenbush manages 27 employees in the fire and health divisions. He stresses that issues are piling up and they will need to be addressed in the coming years.

Ken discusses briefly the Sewer Department: There is a relationship and discussion with the Health Dept. (Engineers deal with size and installation.)

Budget Increases:

Brian Comeau discusses some of the increases in budget:

- Retirement – state continuing to reduce its contribution
- Healthcare insurance
- EMS – reactivation of paramedic schooling
- Collection fees for private billing
- Code Red - reverse 911
- Additional lighting unit with a generator
- Replace utility pickup
- Staff car replacement

New Alarm Truck:

The department needs a new alarm truck, but it is in the budget for 2013. The current bucket truck cannot reach high enough to service fire dept. alarm lines. They have found a used truck for \$20K, but this deal was found after the budget was drawn. Brian Comeau states that they had to put \$8K into the current truck this year for repairs to get it through inspection.

Harry Thayer asks about the used truck for \$20K. Should the truck be purchased even though it is not in budget? The subcommittee strongly feels that this should be discussed further. It would be a massive savings (\$20K used vs. \$167K new).

Don Clement suggests if there is a surplus for 2012, "maybe that money could be used for the truck?" Rob Corson steps in and comments, "Maybe money could be shifted around to aid in the used truck purchase?" → Don Clement is going to look into all options. **It is important that this topic come up at Town Meeting.**

The company that is offering the truck for \$20K has several used trucks and vehicles for sale. Exeter would get first choice; there are 1 or 2 that fit the needs of the department.

> Unanimous Vote: Take advantage of this opportunity and purchase the used truck

Budget Breakdown Discussion:

The proposed budget is an \$18K increase over the last year (3.69%).

Stipends:

Corey Stevens asks about the cell phone stipend of \$32. Ken explains that cell phones are heavily used but difficult to manage. Instead, they give the 5 lieutenants \$32/month for basic cell phone service and if they want more features, they are personally responsible for paying any amount over \$32. Ken mentions that they are saving with this program. The men use the phones all the time. It is a necessity, and is a part of the business.

Eric Wilking explains that the department pays 8 employees \$500-\$750 for additional duties they perform. Instead of asking them to put in for overtime, a stipend is given. For example: paying the vehicle mechanic to be on call.

Uniforms:

Brian Comeau explains that in the past firefighters were responsible for getting their uniforms using a stipend. Now they must order their uniforms through the department. There was always a concern that they were not buying what they needed.

AEDs

Rob Corson brings up AEDs throughout the town. "How are they controlled and maintained?" Ken Berkenbush explains that the fire department does not have a person in charge of AEDs in town.

Equipment Increase:

There is a need to replace some equipment due to safety guidelines. Also the department will need to purchase additional equipment for the apparatus due to an insurance review coming up. This equipment needs to be available on the trucks.

Cistern Maintenance:

Eric Wilking discusses cistern maintenance. In the past this budget item was cut back, but this year someone approached the department regarding the maintenance. This individual proposed that they have routine maintenance. The budget money is distributed over a 5 year plan. This money will be used to contract the job. A common issue is debris. This contractor would be responsible for taking care of all issues.

Note: The FD is responsible to replacing the water they take. This projected cost is now included in the budget

Harry Thayer asks “Do insurance companies cover the costs of emergency water usage?” No one seemed to know. It may be smart to look into this.

Reverse 911 (Code Red) Increase:

There is an \$8,500 annual cost (this is a middle of the road program). This program will be reviewed annually to be sure it is cost effective.

The subcommittee supports Code Red program. They all agree that it is a benefit to the entire community. They all feel strongly that linking up with surrounding towns would be ideal and a smart move. They all want to know what some of the other towns are doing. Ken Berkenbush mentions that both Portsmouth and North Hampton have the program. It would be beneficial to have all towns on the Code Red system.

Selling points: The subcommittee feels that it is important to sell this to the community. Some selling points are that it is very user friendly, the software is compatible with dispatch, people can sign up on the town website, the list is updated monthly, members will receive driving alerts, it is a web-based program, and multiple towns are already using the program.

Arson Supplies:

Ken Berkenbush explains that ideally they want this line item to disappear, but the money has been there since the 70s. No money is requested in this line item.

EM Capital Outlay:

The department would like to purchase and additional Emergency Lighting Unit. The budget reflects an increase of \$16K. Brian Comeau explains that they currently have one, and the entire town uses it. The lights are used for various events and it would be beneficial to own another one for emergencies. The FD is looking into grant options to aid in this purchase.

Rob Corson asks, “Could you rent/lease lighting?” Brian Comeau explains that there are none to rent or lease when emergencies strike.

> The subcommittee is still thinking about this budget item. Their question: “Is it vital that we purchase a new one?”

Mosquito Control:

There is an increase of \$5K to \$60K for 2013. Brian Comeau explains that the West Nile virus is increasing and more action items are in place. There are more measures that are being taken to control the mosquito issue. A contractor is hired from April 1st until the first hard frost. The contractors focus on fields, parks, and other public areas. They obtain water samples during those months. The FD and subcommittee feel that this is very important for the public. It is an emotional item.

> The subcommittee would like to look at the monthly bills.

Health Grant Fund:

This division runs on a state fiscal year from July to June. It is state funded, so if money is not there the program gets shut down. Ken Berkenbush explains that this program is a benefit to the greater Seacoast. Plans are in place for all incidents: shelter during times of emergencies, care centers during times of disease and more. Volunteers come out of this grant. The full budget of this grant will show next year.

Ambulance Revolving Fund:

Eric Wilking discusses the revenue. He explains that annually \$700,000 is billed and \$450,000 is received. He predicts it will be around the same in the coming year. He hopes it will increase. Corey Stevens asks if the revenue remains the same each year. Eric Wilking explains that the rates do go up so there could be increases each year.

Only patient transport is billed. Cancelled calls are not.

More Budget Increases:

The department would like to send two firefighters to paramedic training but can only offer it to one. \$10,644 is budgeted for one in 2013.

Surplus:

Corey Stevens asks about surplus, "When there is a surplus, where do those funds go?" Rob Corson and Harry Thayer mention that those funds go into the general fund and from there the money can go anywhere.

New Ambulance:

Brian Comeau shares that a new ambulance will be delivered next week. Monthly payments begin in January 2013 and will come from the Ambulance Revolving Fund. There will be no impact on the tax rate. He mentions that ideally they would like to replace ambulances every 6 years.

Health Insurance:

Harry Thayer asks about Obamacare and how it may impact ambulance revenue. This is something we do not know yet. At this time this is what we know:

Currently:

For a \$562 bill: Medicare pays –\$428

For a \$562 bill: Private insurance pays – \$450

For a \$562 bill: Medicaid pays – \$175

Insurance Refunds:

Corey Stevens asks about refunds. Brian Comeau explains that sometimes payments are often delayed due to litigation. They mail bills to the insurance companies and some individuals pay directly and later the health insurance companies also pay. The FD then must refund the over payment.

Double Runs:

Harry Thayer asks about what is going on with “double runs” (back-to-back ambulance calls). Brian Comeau states that they are staying consistent with those runs.

Substation Discussion:

Subcommittee discussed briefly what the plan is for a second station. Is this the year to present this?

Looking ahead for this station:

It’s important to staff the station properly. The FD mentions that they won’t staff the new station until 2015 when construction is completed. Brian Comeau explains that it will cost an additional \$320,000 annually to man the station with 4 new firefighters. The plan is to drop the Court St. station manning from 6 FFs to 4, and move 8 firefighters to the new substation (4 per shift at Court St., 3 per shift at the sub-station). They will manage the new location out of the old station and will use the same management model for each station.

Harry Thayer explains that the town did not support the idea of combining divisions (planning and building) at the formerly proposed station. The vision is to keep divisions where they are. Rob Corson is not an advocate of decentralization of the departments.

> The subcommittee will further discuss some of the above topics at an Oct. 23 meeting at the fire station at 6:30 p.m.

Meeting Adjourns: 5:05 pm

Minutes completed by:

Laura Jeffords